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Venus envy: problematizing solidarity behaviour and queen bees

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Abstract

Purpose – Aims to critique solidarity behaviour as a means of advancing women in management; questions the queen bee concept and raises negative relations between women.

Design/methodology/approach – Conceptual paper which critiques extant research and approaches to advancing women in management identifying alternative perspectives.

Findings – Assumptions of solidarity behaviour set expectations of senior women which cannot be fulfilled. Continued use of the unproblematic queen bee label, without acknowledgement of the embedded gendered context for women in senior management, perpetuates a “blame the woman” perspective as a “one-woman responsibility”. Emerging from the gendered nature of organization, female misogyny may be a means of exploring negative relations between women to challenge existing gendered organizations which sustain the *status quo*.

Research limitations/implications – Mediates recommendations of senior women as mentors and role models, whilst blaming them for being more male than men, by calling for action to challenge and change the gendered social order which impacts on women in management. Empirical research is required.

Originality/value – Considers the impact of negative relations between women to highlight how the gendered social order encourages and exacerbates differences between women; challenges assumptions of solidarity behaviour and problematizes the queen bee label.

Keywords Women executives, Women, Sexual discrimination, Intergroup relations, Affirmative action, Glass ceiling

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

There has been significant investment and relative success in developing a critical mass of women in middle management in the UK. However, the overall profile of the woman manager has changed little in the last ten years; women still earn less than men; gender segregation within management functions still remains (Davidson and Burke, 2000) and representation at senior and executive levels remains problematic. The slow progress of women in senior management worldwide means that research into the position of women in management continues to be crucial in order to challenge the status quo and offer areas for challenge and change.

Mathur-Helm (2005) comments that within the Fortune 500 companies only one in eight corporate officers are women and very few occupy positions of CEO, president,

COO, or executive vice president (Catalyst, 2000). Thus, evidencing the continued need to explore barriers to women's advancement in management with only a few women able to shatter the barriers (Nelson and Burke, 2000). In the UK, women hold only 24 per cent of all management positions and only 9.9 per cent of directorships (Wilson, 2004); with only one woman CEO in the UK FTSE 100 list (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2003a).

It is argued here that extant research and interventions challenging and exploring the position of women in management are, in general, based on principles and assumptions of sisterhood and solidarity behaviour.

Solidarity behaviour is complex in that it assumes that women view other women as their natural allies, regardless of hierarchical differences and that senior women should view the "women in management mantle" as their individual responsibility. However, solidarity behaviour may set expectations of senior women in management which cannot be fulfilled. There are tensions in the way that women perceive senior women in management and the expectations they hold of them, demonstrated by the contradictions of solidarity behaviour versus the historical queen bee syndrome (Staines *et al.*, 1973; Abramson, 1975) and the complexity to life as a woman in senior management, which does not appear to be problematized in research calling for senior women to support other women. In particular incongruity between the managerial and the gender role impacts upon how women in senior management view and are viewed by other women in the organization. While assumptions of solidarity behaviour are presented as positive and proactive in nature, there appears to be little space in which to raise and consider the complex issue of negative relations between women in management without creating another "blame or fix the women" position.

This paper explores the gendered context of women in senior management, critiques the queen bee label and raises negative relations between women, in order to frame the complexity of these relations and to challenge assumptions of sisterhood and solidarity behaviour.

Sisterhood and solidarity behaviour

Women are now more prevalent in supervisory and middle management and this should have made a positive impact on the experiences of women in management. Kanter (1977) argued that as the relative size of a minority group increased then members should begin to experience a reduction in stress and other performance measures while their opportunity to demonstrate competence and managerial potential should increase. Also as the sex ratio becomes more balanced Kanter (1977) noted, then minority members can become allies, form coalitions, affect the cultures of the group and develop support networks that enhance the chances of women's career advancement; these types of activities now form the basis of what is now known as sisterhood and solidarity behaviour.

Whilst the presence of women in senior management is perceived as more of a direct challenge to male power in organizations (Davidson and Burke, 1994), it is also portrayed as a beacon of hope for all women from the top down. Kanter's work has been significantly progressed with particular emphasis on networks and coalitions. For example, McKeen and Burke (1994) draw attention to the need for role models so that more feminine ways of managing may be included in the acceptable behaviours for future senior roles. While Singh and Vinnicombe (2003b) see women executive

directors as role models for women lower down in the organization. Senior women are often recommended to support, develop and to work to raise the profile of other women, enabling them to perhaps “short cut” the otherwise painful journey into management and senior management.

Recently Korabik and Abbondanza (2004) explored solidarity behaviour in the context of women in management, noting that this behaviour is multidimensional. Solidarity behaviour brings together processes of forming alliances, collaborating, joining together with shared aims, a commitment to changing social structures for women at the collective not just the individual level and behaviours which demonstrate loyalty and gender awareness in managerial practice. In what they argue is new research which contradicts previous “queen bee” approaches of women failing to help one another, they questioned senior women to determine the extent to which they help and support one another in what they conceptualise as solidarity behaviour.

Korabik and Abbondanza’s (2004) preliminary results suggest that women do, indeed, display solidarity behaviour with mentoring, modifying organizational policies and supporting their rights as examples of reported behaviours. They conclude that solidarity behaviour occurs on an individual and group basis, both within and outside organizations, which includes all forms of ties and coalitions that women may form in organizational settings, such as mentoring, modifying organizational policies and supporting their rights.

While the total scope of the factors influencing solidarity behaviour has yet to be identified, it is enacted by women acting as instruments of social change (Korabik and Abbondanza, 2004); thus placing the emphasis of change in organization yet again, upon individual women.

An assumption of sisterhood and solidarity behaviour contends that women will support and align themselves with other women. This assumption is implicit within those research studies which seek to explain the experiences and position of women in management, recommending that women aspiring to or progressing within management should have proactive, visible and high profile senior women as role models and mentors and their involvement in women’s networks.

The argument here, however, is that historically women in management research has in general ignored, and to some extent, therefore perpetuated a “cover up” of negative relations, between women in management. Rather it has promoted the need for more women to be involved in solidarity behaviour as the primary means of encouraging and supporting women in management. Many researchers considering women in management tend to look up to those women in senior positions, either recommending that senior women do more to help other women (Bryans and Mavin, 2003; Mavin and Bryans, 2002; McKeen and Burke, 1994; Singh *et al.*, 2000; Singh and Vinnicombe, 2003a) or blame them for becoming honorary men (Gini, 2001), or both. Such research is often based upon principles of sisterhood and solidarity behaviour for women in management, underpinned by the implicit assumption that women will support and align themselves with other women.

However, this approach of solidarity behaviour is challenged as the complexity of women’s experiences in senior management and negative relations between women are raised and explored.

Are women in management natural allies?

Negative relations between women in organization have been highlighted in different arenas since the 1960s (Abrahamson, 1975; Goldberg, 1968; Legge, 1987; Nicolson, 1996; Staines *et al.*, 1973). Legge's (1987) position is that women fail to exploit their potential power in organizations resulting in women failing to build alliances with their natural allies, other women. But do women view other women as their natural allies in management?

There is evidence to show that women in organization find it difficult to relate to women in senior management and that their reactions to senior women (and vice versa) perpetuate divisions between them. Nieva and Gutek (1981) argue that the price extracted from women even peripherally included in a predominantly male work group includes a willingness to turn against other women, to ignore disparaging remarks about women and to contribute to the derogation of other women. Indeed, "women are still more likely than men to be disloyal to their same-sex colleagues" (Greer, 2000, p. 394). These views are not new but explanations for them have tended to be that somehow individual women are responsible and leading to a "one-woman responsibility" perspective.

In relation to women's views of women in senior management, O'Leary and Ryan (1994) argue that women in senior management are role-deviant and that when women encounter women at work, their normative expectations of one another illustrate sex-role spill over at its worst.

Women do not have consciously articulated norms for boss – subordinate interactions when the boss is a woman and therefore it is not surprising that women at work tend to react to women bosses as women and to men bosses as bosses. For example, women subordinates expect their women bosses to be more understanding, more nurturant, more giving and more forgiving than men (O'Leary and Ryan, 1994, p. 72). Therefore:

... suspicion and equivocation from other women can be used to fuel the belief that women are unsuitable for certain positions because other people, including women, do not want to work for or to deal with women managers or professionals (Marshall, 1984, p. 97).

Powell and Butterfield (2003, p. 92) agree that there is incongruity between the managerial role and senior women's gender role in terms of self-concept:

If women conform to the gender role by displaying predominately feminine characteristics, they fail to meet the perceived requirements of the managerial role, which calls for mostly masculine characteristics. However, if they compete with men for managerial positions and conform to the managerial role by displaying predominately masculine characteristics, they fail to meet the requirements of the female gender role, which calls for deference to the authority of men.

The assumption of women as natural allies is particularly challenged once a woman destabilises the established gendered order by moving into senior management. The nature of senior management for women and the behaviours and actions required to gain entry and remain within this environment do little to sustain notions of sisterhood or solidarity behaviour.

Indeed, Wacjman (1998) argues that there is not much room at the top for women and that successful women are not so much representatives of, as exiles from, their sex. Senior women become isolated from other women. Wacjman (1998) explains that as

organizations are a crucial site for the ordering of gender and for the establishment and preservation of male power then similarities between women and men who have achieved senior management positions far outweigh any differences between women and men as groups.

Coates (1998, p. 9) also argues the suppression of femininity as prerequisite to joining the corporate crusade and comments:

... the corporate crusade, its strategy and mechanisms, are more subtle than anything experienced earlier in the management of organizations, as a result individuality and femininity have been sacrificed.

Whilst Wacjman (1998, pp. 7-8) notes:

... women's presence in the world of men is conditional on them being willing to modify their behaviour to become more like men or to be perceived as more male than men

and Maier (1999, p. 89) argues:

... men and women recruited into dominance within organizations tend to internalise the requirements of the position becoming like men.

In this context it is clear that women cannot win and they face the contradictory demands of being feminine and business like (Wacjman, 1998, pp. 7-8). They cannot join as a woman and once they start to behave like a man, they cannot be a "proper woman" (Maddock, 1999).

All tokens face the same predicament, how to lose their exaggerated visibility and win the group's acceptance. Token women experience particular strains and pressures not felt by dominant members of the same organizational status. Pressures include feelings of isolation and high levels of visibility, denial of social support but pressures to conform to a restricted number of sex roles (Simpson, 2000). Simpson (2000) argues that women may succeed by acting and behaving like men so that they disassociate themselves from the minority group to which they belong to conform to their male colleagues' style of management. However, rather than blaming individual women, this is explained by Maier (1999) who points out:

... organizations implicitly, extensively and consistently favour the masculine worldview, whether they realise it or not, rewarding those who conform to it and marginalising or subordinating those men and women alike who don't (Cheng, 1996); men's worldviews mesh neatly with the social order of organization, whereas those of women tend to clash with it... (Maier, 1999, p. 89)

If you are a senior woman and your peer group are senior men then it is difficult not to develop behaviours and style congruent with "fitting in" (Bryans and Mavin, 2003) and acceptance.

There are further contradictions identified in the literature as assumptions of sisterhood and solidarity behaviour also underpins those studies which propose that women in senior management have not paved the way for other women. Thus, perpetuating the incongruity between the managerial and the gender role without acknowledging the context in which senior women work. Gini (2001) argues that women are not very nice and this is why we do not like them...

The argument is that those few women who have broken through the glass ceiling have done so not by embracing feminism but by outperforming men on their own terms: classic

careerists who happen to be women. Gini (2001) quotes consultants Buffington and Neff who argue that some of these successful women are more combative and ruthless than their male counterparts because they feel they have to prove they can be rough, tough and resilient. Known as the “only bra in the room syndrome” characteristics of these types of achievers is their lack of empathy and support of other working women, especially their subordinates. “Having achieved success by playing hardball and working hard, they expect the same from others” (Gini, 2001, p. 99). “... Consequently, many women do not like to work for female bosses” (Gini, 2001, p. 100).

Problematizing “queen bee”; senior women and the “women in management mantle”

Such studies can present senior women as more “male than men” for “pulling up the ladder” or the “drawbridge” for other women once they have reached senior levels, therefore creating further barriers to keep women in their place in management. Starr (2001, p. 9) gives an example of this and comments on the names used for senior women in her research:

... various derogatory names were levelled at these women: the honorary blokes, the men in skirts, traitors to the cause – the individuals being viewed as having relinquished feminist agendas and “sisterhood” in the pursuit of masculine policy agendas which, while bestowing personal benefits, exclude women in general.

These perceptions of senior women also perpetuate the unhelpful but continued use of the term queen bee (Staines *et al.*, 1973; Abramson, 1975) to label senior women in management. Significantly whilst there is a wealth of research which considers the gendered nature of organization at senior levels and elsewhere in management, there appears to be a gap between senior management as a masculine, gendered place that senior women have to continually learn to survive within incongruous gender roles, and the expectations of them as individual women, in promoting and progressing women in management issues.

Acker (1990) characterises gendered processes which make up organization arguing that organizations construct symbols and images that explain, express, reinforce or sometimes oppose gendered divisions of labour. There are processes such as interactions between people, the creation of gendered individual identity and the gendered conceptualizations of elements of organizational structure and activities which impact upon informal and formal messages and which socially construct men and women’s attitudes, behaviours and experiences.

As part of gendered organization, Kanter (1977) argues that homosocial reproduction is a primary motivation in bureaucracies, in that decisions are made to minimize uncertainty. One way to minimize uncertainty in the executive suite is to close top management positions to people who are regarded as “different”. Thus, women have a difficult time in entering top management positions because they are seen as different by male incumbents (Kanter, 1977).

Indeed:

... a woman leader is not viewed as androgynous or as undifferentiated from her male counterparts. She is viewed as a woman who is a leader; in recognising women leaders as women, we know that they become more visible and enjoy a broader scope to their visibility than do their male counterparts (Adler, 1999, p. 259).

Understandings of women's careers requires the acknowledgement that women have fundamentally different experiences and women find themselves in different situations when developing their career compared with men (Mavin, 2001a):

Some women who enter male-dominated fields may try to assimilate (fit in by acting like the men in the in-group), whereas others may experience marginalisation (feel isolated and like out-group members); both of these options can result in a number of undesirable consequences (Korabik, 1999, p. 15).

If as a senior woman you do not lead on the women in management mantle, if you do not conform to a feminine model and you develop commonalities with your peer group, who will be mostly men, then you will be vilified for not representing the interests of women and for becoming more male than the men: a no-win situation for women in management.

Starr (2001) offers an alternative view of women in senior management and solidarity behaviour, arguing that the 1970s/1980s femocrat slogan that you should "lift as you climb" (i.e. support and mentor other women in their careers) has diminished:

At the beginning of a new century, organizational restructuring has created a more male dominated and competitive institution which means that "it's each woman for herself" (Starr, 2001, p. 9).

It is argued here that sisterhood and solidarity behaviour may set expectations of senior women which cannot be fulfilled and may perpetuate the continued unhelpful labelling of senior women as queen bees; neither of which challenge male dominated competitive institutions in ways which engage both men and women in change processes.

Staines *et al.* (1973) offered the label "queen bee" in their early study concerned with women's attitudes towards women's liberation. They found that some women were actively opposed to any changes in traditional sex roles and exemplified what they labelled as the "queen bee" syndrome:

The queen bee displayed an attitude of counter militancy which was based on their personal success within the system: both professional success (high status job with good pay) and social success (popularity with men, attractiveness and a good marriage) (Rindfleisch, 2000, p. 172)).

Staines *et al.* (1973) summarised the attitude of queen bees with the statement "if I can do it without a whole movement to help me, so can other women".

Abramson (1975) used the term "queen bee" to describe women who had already gained prominence in management but who tended to deny that there was systematic discrimination against women. She explained these values were held because if women admitted there was systematic discrimination against other women it would undermine their own level of achievement. Abramson (1975) argued that while few women were willing to recognise the problem of gender inequality, fewer still were willing to do anything about it, so that queen bees would not accept that women who are capable of a management career are unable to progress due to discrimination.

For women in management it appears that the label and concept of queen bee has been accepted as unproblematic and like solidarity behaviour its use and message ignores the gendered experiences of senior women in management and the complexity

of their subjectivities. Continuing to use the term queen bee to describe women in management presents another “blame or fix the women” position and deflects constructive analysis and challenges to gendered structures and organization.

The use of the label queen bee has made a come back. It is commonly used in the popular press and often used to communicate “bad behaviour” from senior women to other women in organization, in the context of the “queen bee” who will sting if her power is threatened by other women. For example, discussing relations between senior and other women, Cherne (2003) notes:

You are at a disadvantage because you made the logical assumption that one female will help another, or even that she will mentor and guide you. The queen bee does not bond with other women. She prefers to work with men. If you think you are working for one, note her behaviour toward males. She is more involved with them, and tends to reward, support, and promote them ahead of females. She will also react if she notices you networking with men she sees as being in power positions.

This interpretation of queen bee ignores the complex gendered processes within organization and gendered subjectivities of senior women; sex role stereotyped expectations of senior women are perpetuated and the assumption that individual senior women should be representatives of and responsible for the progression of, women in management remains unquestioned, as does the role and impact of women, men and gendered organization.

Indeed, “women versus women” in management is not as simple as Mooney (2005, p. 49) contends in the popular press when discussing her forthcoming book entitled “I can’t believe she did that!” Mooney states “in professions largely dominated by men, such as law and finance, you would expect women to club together – far from it – scarcity brings out a vicious killer instinct”.

The perpetuation of the queen bee concept as unproblematic may be part of a wider discourse of keeping women in second place in management, whilst ignoring the complex gendered processes within organization which socially construct the experiences of senior women; a discourse which perpetuates the divide between women in management and senior management.

Fundamental to solidarity behaviour is that senior women should and do view the “women in management” mantle as their responsibility. However, Mattis (1993) argues that women directors want to be recognised for their talents and abilities, not as representatives of the interests of women. While Rindfleish (2000) in her Australian study of women in senior management argues that women are heterogeneous, they cannot be stereotyped as queen bees but they do not want the responsibility for leading on the advancement of women in management. Rindfleish (2000) found that the majority of senior women in her study believed that there are barriers to women’s progress in management but disagreed as to the nature of the barriers, what their responsibility is to change them and were not keen to be responsible for removing them. These senior women did not view sisterhood and solidarity behaviour as their responsibility and considering their gendered contexts, why would they?

Negative relations between women: female misogyny?

How we investigate and explain the tensions and contradictions raised here without falling into another “blame the woman” position? Previous research has explored women in management by analysing gendered relations between men and women but

there is a lack of research exploring relations between women in management. Indeed there are few studies which concentrate on the differences between women in management or the propensity for women managers to assist other women in their aspirations to senior management (Rindfleish, 2000). One explanation for this is that it is very difficult to do so without falling into yet another "blame the women" standpoint.

However, just as patriarchy embedded within gender systems in organization constructs and manifests through misogynistic attitudes and behaviours of men towards women, then these gender systems can also be viewed as a framework to explore relations between women. For example, as women move into a predominantly male world of senior management, they are brought up sharply against prevailing misogynies and they will only accept them if they are part of the process of swallowing the masculinist cultural package of which they are a part (Greer, 2000, p. 222). As argued earlier, when reconsidering this in terms of women's relationships with other women in organization, then women are brought up sharply against prevailing female misogynies, which manifest through women accepting male constructions of the female, who do so (sometimes unknowingly) as they submit to or accept the gendered structures and order, thus perpetuating a gendered status quo.

Such manifestations of organizational gender systems can be viewed as "female misogyny" providing a means of tentatively raising and discussing negative relations between and towards other women. Evidence of female misogyny by women in management may be more evident at junctures where women either threaten to or actually succeed in, de-stabilizing the established gender order by either displaying ambition towards senior management or by actually succeeding in a move into senior management.

Resulting from gendered systems and incongruity between gender roles and senior management, Starr (2001, p. 9) provides some examples of how these negative relations between women can manifest:

Competition between women may go deeper than professional rivalry, to include sub-conscious jealousy and competition based on age or appearance (attractiveness, weight, dress sense). This suggests that at times women may read each other's sexed bodies through men's eyes in sexual competition. At other times the perception of separation and competition is explained in work related terms through factors such as intellectual ability, professional connections, reputation, etc. Furthermore, unlike the more open forms of hostility exhibited by men, women observe that competition or opposition from women is more likely to manifest as passive resistance.

Established gender systems embedded in organization and historical assumptions of "management as male" (Schein and Davidson, 1993), socially construct and impact upon women's behaviour towards women in senior management. Wacjman (1998) argues that many women undermine women's authority and notes that various constructions of femininity which women deploy in relating to men in power, involving being flirtatious, admiring and generally supportive actively, reconstitute hetero-sexualised forms of dominance and subordination.

Therefore, women find it difficult to deal with senior women because the strategies they are accustomed to using with men are inappropriate for women. Wacjman (1998) contends that as women have internalised gender hierarchies, it seems almost proper for a man to be in a superior position. In the case of senior men the related power is

eroticised and this complex intertwining of power with sexuality means that senior women who are powerful provoke anxieties and ambivalence in women as well as men.

This analysis raises a number of questions; how can we safely, without blaming individual women, explore the contradictions between the call for senior women to engage in solidarity behaviour whilst continuing to label them queen bees? How can we safely explore the relationships between women in management, while considering the impact of sex-role overspill and the incongruity between the gender role and behaviours required in senior management?

It is argued that historically embedded organizational gender systems which draw upon patriarchy to reinforce the place of men in management also construct women's place in management as second place (Mavin, 2001b). As a result, interactions between women, resulting from concern for, and possible threats to, established gendered hierarchies, become struggles over destabilization, change and/or maintenance of the gendered status quo. Processes of female misogyny therefore emerge from the complex way in which gender order is embedded and the underlying assumptions and behaviours which socially construct and impact upon everyday experiences for women in management.

The significant issue which requires further research is the way in which the privileged gendered social order evident within management, encourages and exacerbates differences between women, in order to prevent opposition in the form of successful challenges and resulting change. This is not to point to orchestrated behaviours but rather to identify and to challenge implicit gendered assumptions which foster difference and fragmentation, which is, after all, easier to dismiss than joint action. This alternative perspective on relations between women in management considers the gendered contexts in which negative relations between women are co-constructed and a framework through which to explore the tensions and contradictions identified here.

It has been argued that there is a lack of empirical research investigating how processes of female misogyny manifest within organization; the area is under researched and under theorised. However, future research may enable the surfacing of difficult debates concerning negative relations between women in management, in order to challenge existing gendered structures, processes and cultures which sustain the status quo for women in management.

Conclusion

Several issues emerge from these debates. The challenge to solidarity behaviour as a means of advancing women in management and the assumption that women will align themselves with other women; the expectations of senior women in relation to other women in management and whether these are appropriate and realistic; questioning the unproblematized and continued use of the queen bee label and raising negative relations and introducing the concept of female misogyny between women, without creating another "blame the women" perspective. In order to change the experiences of women in management, rather than masking or ignoring the tensions and complexity embedded in different perspectives and experiences of women in management, these should be openly and transparently discussed as a means of consciousness raising.

Currently more senior women are recommended as mentors and role models, whilst at the same time they are blamed for being more male than men. However, whilst there

is a wealth of research which considers the gendered nature of senior management and other levels in management, there appears to be a gap between senior management as a patriarchal, gendered place that senior women have to continually learn to survive and the expectations of senior women in promoting and progressing women in management issues.

Further research is required to investigate how women in senior management view their role in relation to the "women in management mantle"; the assumptions of sisterhood and solidarity behaviour and how the queen bee concept can be further problematized to prevent continued negative labelling of women individually and collectively. Indeed, rather than focusing on solidarity behaviour between women in management as a way forward, there is a need to refocus future action on challenging and changing overall gendered structures, cultures and systems which continue to impact upon all women in organization.

One way of engaging in future action is to empirically investigate negative relations between women and the contexts in which this occurs. A subsequent paper offers such research, exploring how less positive relations between women challenge assumptions of solidarity behaviour in practice and question women as queen bees. The research offers subjective narratives from senior women in UK management and academia concerning their experiences and views on the "women in management mantle". The narratives highlight the complexity of negative relations and processes of female misogyny between women in management, regardless of hierarchical level.

Future work is also required to establish how to engage in practical consciousness-raising with women at different levels in management in order to highlight explicitly how the gender order exacerbates differences between them in order to maintain the gendered status quo. This type of practical action may provide space to engage in difficult discussions. Future research is therefore important to establish whether this type of action can challenge the current place of women in management whilst at the same time constructing a different future for women in senior management.

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